

## **Consider the convenience of remote audits: Remote audits help HIM and coding staff maintain productivity level**

When a vendor reviews inpatient and outpatient medical records to gauge the accuracy and quality of coding, validate DRGs, and assess documentation, the process typically takes one to several weeks, depending on the size of the facility. It also usually involves auditors coming to your facility and working through the files in the presence of the coders whose work they are auditing.

Now consider the advantages of conducting this same quality audit remotely. The advantages of a remote audit extend beyond savings on auditors' travel costs. One of the main benefits is that HIM and coding staff members are not aware that the audit is occurring, making it a much less intrusive process.

"It all happens behind the scenes, and so the HIM and coding staff is less involved and less concerned. A lot of coding departments can find it disruptive to have auditors there on-site, since [the auditors] may be taking up space in the department," says **DeAnne W. Bloomquist, RHIT, CCS**, president and chief consultant for Mid-Continent Coding, Inc., in Overland Park, KS. "Therefore, [HIM and coding staff] can be more productive while the audits are occurring."

A remote audit also reduces the amount of preparation time for the HIM staff, says **Marcia Vaqar, MPH, RHIA, CCS, CCS-P**, coding manager at Via Christi Regional Medical Center Wichita (KS) Health Network. Bloomquist's company recently conducted a remote audit for Vaqar's facility, a first for both organizations. "I think it was quieter because we didn't have an on-site auditor. The HIM staff did not have to physically pull records, so the workload was better."

### **Prepare for unexpected problems**

To ensure that your department benefits from the advantages of a remote audit, be aware of, and plan ahead for potential hurdles that can slow down the process. Clear communication with the auditors is vital.

"You have to have very good communication with the auditor about the process, especially if it's your first time doing a remote audit. Be open and follow through," Vaqar says. "After the first day, I would follow up with the auditors to make sure that everything was going smoothly, and that they had everything they needed."

Even if past on-site audits with the same auditing company have been smooth and predictable, you still need to be ready for the unexpected when switching to a remote audit.

### **Consider strategies to improve efficiency**

Bloomquist and Vaqar learned several lessons during their first remote audit experience. Consider these six tips to help ensure that your remote audits don't get bogged down by similar surprises:

**1. Pull extra records.** Provide backup records for your vendor to audit in case some of the records are not imaged in the system. Give yourself a backup cushion of at least 10% of the records to be audited. Remember that communication is an important tool to help avoid delays in the audit process.

"If I had communicated with [the auditor] on the third day and found out that she needed more records, we could have had them to her faster, and the audit would not have taken as long as it did," Vaqar says.

**2. Select records carefully.** To maximize the audit's benefits, be thoughtful about the records you

pull.

"Be cautious about the charts you select, in case the DRG changes. If it's upward moving, you want to have time to collect the benefit from the audit," Vaqar says. "Don't select older charts. If you select a chart that's 50 days out, you only have 10 more days to collect."

**3. Have a backup plan for downtime.** Prepare for periods of time when the auditors can't access your records. For example, a system crash or high traffic on your server can prevent them from accessing your records.

Ensure that the auditor has contacts in your information technology and HIM departments to help handle these potential problems.

Also, if your auditors are traveling and conducting some of their audits on the road from hotels, they could run into computer connectivity problems because of hotel computer firewalls. A firewall is a piece of software or hardware that hotels use to screen out hackers, viruses, and worms that try to reach their computer system over the Internet.

"There was no work-around. I could not get past it," Bloomquist says, of his experience of trying to work around a firewall during an audit. "I just had to wait to get in another day."

**4. Conduct a preliminary chart review.** Ensure that the necessary information is in the charts to avoid wasting time during the audit.

Facilities working with hybrid charts are especially vulnerable to this problem. For example, if the charts no longer contain a coding summary sheet, don't bother pulling them, because auditors won't have the necessary information.

"Some of the charts had been imaged, so the hand-pulled charts did not have the information we needed," Bloomquist says. "When you give auditors certain chart types to audit, if there's no documentation in the charts, there's no point looking at them. They have to have a complete record."

**5. Ensure that the records are imaged.** Sometimes, records that are on the list to send to auditors to review are not in the imaging system.

The biggest challenge for auditors, even during an on-site audit, is obtaining the necessary information, Bloomquist says.

"I honestly think moving into an electronic format is going to solve these kinds of problems," Bloomquist says. "It is a big hassle to pull charts, because someone has to physically take a list and get each chart off the wall. Our database administrator is currently working with clients to try and import data ahead of the reviews so we can hit the ground running."

Scan or fax the UB-04s and other billing information to your auditors ahead of time. Auditors should have the information at least one week before the audit.

"The more time the auditor has the data to start compressing and entering it in their database product, the better," Bloomquist says.**6. Ensure that the auditors are familiar with your internal programs.** Some programs can be more difficult than others to navigate. This can make it hard for vendors to estimate how much time it will take to complete the audit.

Although they don't necessarily require more time to complete, remote audits are also not any

faster than traditional on-site audits.

"For some systems, there are many screens that must be accessed for each record, depending on the client's different applications," Bloomquist says. "Therefore, it may not be faster than an on-site coding review service."

Ensure that auditors have all of the necessary login information and access before the project begins. Vendors should have a clear idea of high-traffic service times, what their access to the facility will be, and how often they might be kicked out of the system.

"[Vaqaar's department's] program is fairly easy to set up and navigate, but others are not always that easy," Bloomquist says. "The vendor needs to have all their stuff up and running before they commit to an audit. Make sure they've tried to access the system with a test patient first."

Ultimately, remote audits can achieve the same end as on-site audits, minus the interruptions to your HIM and coding staff members. You just have to plan ahead, keep the lines of communication open, and prepare the necessary information well in advance of the audit, allowing time in the schedule to make any necessary adjustments.

"Plan your first remote audit carefully with your HIM coding services vendor, and allow for some extra time on both sides," Bloomquist says. "Remote applications are wonderful, but they require extra infrastructure, support, and patience."

*Editor's note: This article was adapted from the September Briefings on Coding Compliance Strategies newsletter. Visit <http://www.hcpro.com/pub-147-9-2007.html> to view the entire newsletter.*

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